



## On the Benefits of Careful Within-Task Planning and Task Repetition in EFL Classrooms

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### Abstract

This paper is aimed at reviewing the theoretical and practical issues regarding careful within-task planning and task repetition in EFL classrooms. In particular, the paper focuses on the combined effects for these two implementation variables on the enhancement of accuracy, complexity, and fluency in EFL learners' oral production. Research shows that careful within-task planning has positive impacts on accuracy and complexity of learner language. Nonetheless, it is sometimes avoided because of its detrimental effects on fluency. Also, the practice of task repetition might be sometimes frowned upon given its superficial resemblance to what was prevalent in the Behaviorist era. However, both theory and teachers' experience in the EFL context confirm that repeating tasks, with certain time-intervals in between, assists complexity and fluency. Careful within-task planning and task repetition, combined, have the potential to help learners attending to both form and meaning and thus enhancing accuracy, complexity, and fluency simultaneously.

**Keywords:** Careful within-task planning, EFL classrooms, Task repetition

### 1. Introduction

During the last decade task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT/L) has turned out to be the buzzword in the EFL context. Despite this surge of interest in the academia, language teachers and practitioners have voiced concern at the utility of TBLT to facilitate the process of language production and acquisition in the EFL context (Sheen, 1994; Swan, 2005). The sources of such concerns are diverse. In this paper, however, we touch upon some of them under three main headings; this will serve as a prelude to our further discussions regarding careful within-task planning and task repetition.

#### 1.1 Learners' expectations

In the first place, in the EFL context, and in particular in the Iranian context, language learners expect language teaching practice to enjoy some degree of face validity. In fact, Iranian EFL learners have proved somewhat resistant to innovation and, therefore, they do not approve such radical departures from the traditional language teaching methodologies which are still prevalent in many Iranian language canterers. For instance, performing a game-like jigsaw

task, they may think, does not help them learning language. They expect to witness more explicit and interventionist methodologies.

### 1.2 Teacher-student relationships

In the Iranian context (and of course some other EFL contexts), English language classes have long been teacher-fronted ones with teachers playing active roles and serving as one of the major sources of input to language learners. TBLT, however, empowers language learners by letting them to have a voice in the classroom. This might, in turn, lead to a kind of gradual transference of power from teachers to language learners, which is not desirable to teachers and to the education system.

### 1.3 Focus on grammar

In the Iranian EFL context, explicit teaching of grammar is of prime importance to language learners. Many language learners conceive of learning a language as mastering grammatical rules and gaining a vast repertoire of vocabulary. However, task-based methodology, by its very nature, puts premium on meaning. In fact, as Skehan and Foster (2001, p. 184) argue, unless task-based methodology is approached appropriately, it can “over-emphasise the importance of just ‘getting the job done’ at the expense of the central purpose of pedagogy: improving target language ability.” Therefore, such an approach may induce learners to fall back on their strategic competence for task completion.

Additionally, most studies conducted in the area of TBLT have been done in tightly controlled settings, which leave us with some questions as to whether or not TBLT works for teachers in the actual classrooms (Van den Branden, 2006). During the last decade, researchers have proposed different implementation variables to make up for the shortcomings of TBLT and to make this approach more useful for second language development. This paper focuses on two of these methodological options and their interaction: careful within-task planning and task repetition.

## 2. Careful within-task planning; theory and practice

In the field of second language acquisition, the notion of planning has been widely used in different models of speech production (Ellis, 1994). The most frequently used and cited theoretical framework in second language speech production research is Levelt’s (1989) model. The mechanisms which underlie speech production as conceptualized by Levelt could be reduced to one sentence: “People produce speech first by *conceptualizing* the message, then by *formulating* its language representation (i.e., encoding it), and finally by *articulating* it [italics added]” (Kormos, 2006, p. 7). Speech production system is also equipped with a ‘self-monitoring mechanism’ (Scovel, 1998). Given the existence of such mechanism, it is safe to posit that in the course of speech production the speaker may detect erroneous or inappropriate structures in the output, and by halting the speech flow finally makes the appropriate correction (Kormos, 2006). In many cases, however, the speaker notices the erroneous forms and brings about corrections prior to articulation and thus engages in what Kormos (2006, p.123) refers to as “covert repair” and carefully plans her speech ‘online’.

Different types of planning are distinguished in terms of when the planning occurs (Ellis, 2005). *Careful within-task planning*, on which this paper focuses, takes place online, during task performance and at the formulation phase of the Levelt’s three-staged model. It is distinguished from *pressured within-task planning* in that in the former language learners have ample time to plan their speech and make use of the allotted time to carefully attend to their performance, whereas in the latter language learners are required to produce language under time pressure (Ellis & Yuan, 2005). Careful within-task planning is conceptually characterized as “... the process by which speakers attend carefully to the formulation stage during speech planning and engage in pre-production and post-production monitoring of their speech acts” (Yuan & Ellis, 2003, p. 6).

Researchers investigating into the effects of planning on learners’ L2 production and acquisition have also distinguished between *on-line* and *off-line (strategic)* planning (Wendel, 1997). The former concerns the kind of planning that takes place during performance, and the latter concerns planning prior to the performance. Planning has been the focus of a series of studies (see Ellis and Yuan, 2004, 2005; Foster, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Robinson, 1995; Skehan & Foster 1997, 2005; Yuan and Ellis, 2003); most of which, however, have investigated strategic (pre-task) planning and only a few of them have addressed careful within-task planning.

Building careful within-task planning into tasks could be operationalized and used in EFL classrooms in three different but complementary ways: (a) by providing careful online planners (COLP) with ample time for task performance to formulate and monitor their language; (b) by placing limitations on the amount of time available to pressured online planners (POLP); and (c) by requiring all participants (COLP as well as POLP) to start task performance straight away. This latter measure is usually taken so as to control for participants’ engagement in pre-task planning (Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Therefore, the operational definition of careful within-task planning has a lot to do with time allotment for task performance.

Research confirms that planning has important bearing on accuracy and complexity of the learner language. Increasing all dimensions of oral production in EFL learners is both desirable and difficult to achieve. The difficulty may derive

from the fact that, from the perspective of information processing theory, our attentional capacity is limited and selective (Schmidt, 2001) and thus cannot process ‘schematic’ and ‘systemic’ knowledge simultaneously (see Skehan, 1998). Bygate (2001) argues that currently one of the challenges SLA researchers face is how to integrate three dimensions of language performance as proposed and discussed by Skehan (1996), namely accuracy, fluency, and complexity. These three aspects of performance are closely linked to the concept of working memory. Working memory, in psycholinguistic parlance, refers to the *function* of the memory store whereas short term memory refers to the *nature* of this memory store (Randall, 2007). It constitutes a *buffer* for conceptualization, formulation, and articulation (see; Levelt, 1989; Kormos, 2006). In the case of speech production in task performance, working memory extracts and stores (temporarily) both linguistic and encyclopedic data from long term memory (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

As far as beginning-level and intermediate language learners are concerned, much of this process hinges on controlled rather than automatic processing which is tremendously demanding. Hence, not surprisingly, L2 learners tend to place higher priority on either linguistic knowledge (i.e. form) or encyclopedic knowledge (i.e. meaning). To show the independence of the three dimensions of performance (i.e. fluency, accuracy, and complexity) making a very brief reference to Skehan’s three-way distinction is in order. Skehan (1998, cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) maintains that meaning appears to be reflected in fluency whereas form is said to be manifest either in accuracy or complexity. He, then, proposes a contrast between meaning and form and, finally, subcategorizes control (accuracy) and restructuring (complexity) under form.

According to this view, task-based methodology, which is in essence meaning-centered and outcome-oriented, may induce learners to *bypass* language form in favor of meaning (Skehan, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 2005). This may in turn lead to inaccuracy or lack of complexity in learner language. As it was mentioned previously, research indicates that careful within-task planning has a beneficial effect on the accuracy and complexity of oral production. However, it has some detrimental effects on fluency. The reason behind this increase in accuracy and/or complexity and the decrease in fluency lies in the fact that our attentional capacity is both limited and selective. Therefore, when language learners pay attention to form (which is responsible for accuracy and complexity) they are left with scant attentional capacity to devote to processing meaning (which is responsible for fluency). In EFL classrooms, too, it is observed that when learners are asked to attend to form they go through a degree of dysfluency. So, what is the solution to this problem?

From this account of meaning-form distinction it becomes evident that if we are to foster fluency of language we have to employ procedural variables such as task repetition which assist processing meaning. And to enhance accuracy or complexity we ought to use such implementation variables as careful within-task planning facilitate processing form. Therefore, in order to move toward the integration of three dimensions of language performance, and as a possible solution to the above-mentioned problem, it is recommended to use careful within-task planning in tandem with some other implementation variables such as task repetition.

### 3. Task repetition; theory and practice

Task repetition has turned out to be part of the solution to the problem mentioned earlier, namely that human beings attention is essentially limited and selective. Hence, there is not enough attentional space for processing form and meaning simultaneously. Consequently, when language learners perform a task for the first time they go through a degree of dysfluency, since they do not have enough attentional resources to conceptualize message.

Research reveals that task repetition assists fluency since “when learners know what they are going to talk or write about they have more processing space available for formulating the language needed to express their ideas with the result that the quantity of the output will be enhanced and also the fluency and complexity” (Ellis, 2003, pp. 246-7). When learners do a task for the first time, since they do not know what the task is about and what general ideas they ought to communicate their fluency decreases. However, when learners do a task for the second time, they produce language more fluently since they know what the task is about and perform the task with a preconceived notion about the content to be communicated.

By way of illustration, as it has been observed in the EFL classrooms, in a narrative task in which learners are required to tell a story from a Tom & Jerry cartoon that they are watching *for the first time*, the probable dysfluency might be attributed to the fact that learners are concerned with *conveyance of the message* (i.e. narrating the cartoon’s story) and with keeping what they have just watched in their working memory. This may use up their attentional resources to a large degree. By repeating the task, however, learners’ knowledge of cartoon’s story frees up some attentional resources. That is, knowing the story (i.e. the meaning) may obviate the need for learners to process meaning in their subsequent performance of the same task. Now, even if learners engage in careful within-task planning, which uses some of the limited attentional capacity, language learners’ fluency increases.

In spite of all this, repetition may be viewed as an obsolete practice which is reminiscent of the behaviorist orthodoxy. However, as far as methodology is concerned, the pendulum is, in a way, swinging back. But, this pendulum swing is

not a radical departure from TBLT underpinnings, in that repeating the task in this new conceptualization results from the full recognition of the complex nature of the underlying psycholinguistic processes. This view is diametrically opposed to the notion that repetition leads to memorization and in turn acquisition. Therefore, the use of task repetition and careful within-task planning are two implementation variables which together can help teachers in the EFL context to enhance all dimensions of language production in language learners.

#### 4. Conclusion

Task-based methodology is based on well-structured psycholinguistic theories and there is a need for more research on the construct of ‘task’, however, “the challenge for a task-based pedagogy . . . is to choose, sequence and implement tasks in ways that will combine a focus on meaning with a focus on form” (Foster, 1999, 69). In this way it would also assist language learning in the EFL context. Despite the host of empirical research which has been conducted to investigate careful within-task planning and task repetition (Ahmadian & Tavakoli, forthcoming; Ellis, 1987; Bygate, 1996, 1999, 2001; Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Yuan 2004, 2005) not much has been done to bring them down to the actual world of classroom practice, for which they are originally intended. So another fertile area of enquiry with respect to task-based approach in general and planning studies in particular would be the kind of research which provides the practitioner with some practical guidelines on how to employ planning and task repetition in the classroom.

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